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Creating new fiction for low-educated immigrant adults: Leapfrogging to digital
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Abstract

Amongst second language learner populations, adults with insufficient native language literacy skills progress the slowest in acquiring linguistic competence and/or developing basic literacy skills in their second language. A large body of research on children shows that those who read for pleasure go further faster in developing comprehension skills. Krashen (1988; 1989; 2003; 2004) extends this to second language learning. Pleasure reading depends on a good selection books available in the home, school or community, but the small quantity of engaging books written for low-educated adults has precluded this practice. Since 2010, the Simply Cracking Good Stories project has been working with creative writers and linguists to produce narratively engaging, cognitively sophisticated and linguistically accessible short fiction books with adult themes. These books are made available in hard copy form but there are a number of reasons to move to digital provision.

Key words: immigrants; fiction; publishing

Introduction

We consider whether adult immigrants learning to read for the first time in a second language (L2) should read hard copy or digital books to foster the habit of pleasure reading. Like four- or five-year-old children, they are emergent readers, but unlike children at this age, these adults' linguistic competence is often at a much lower level. The question of whether digital books can promote pleasure reading by adult emergent L2 readers is set in the context of a project: Simply Cracking Good Stories. This is an on-going collaborative effort by linguists and creative writers to produce new fiction for these emergent readers. From the start of the project in 2010, books have been made available to readers only in traditional, hard copy form. The project now faces the question of whether to make books available in digital form. This could lead to much greater distribution; however there are some challenges. The low literacy of these adult immigrants is accompanied by lack of digital skills. On the surface, it seems that reader factors argue for traditional books, while production and distribution point to digital books. In pursuing the question of whether the project should make books available digitally, we consider these factors as well as issues relating to production and distribution. We cannot ignore the materiality of books in connection with their social function. Should new readers in the 21st century first experience the private and shared delights of old-fashioned books? If these emergent readers use digital formats for pleasure reading from the start, they will have leapfrogged over a step which pre-digital era pleasure readers consider an essential one. Before addressing these issues, we provide a background on these immigrant adults and on the Simply Cracking Good Stories project.

Low-educated immigrant adults and reading for pleasure

Among the roughly 780 million adult illiterates worldwide (UNESCO 2014) are adults from regions whose political instability and/or poverty preclude formal education who immigrate to highly literate societies. These immigrants come from sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, parts of the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and they are expected to gain oral language and literacy skills in language they do not yet know, i.e. the language of their new country. Representing 10% or more of all immigrants (Baynham et al. 2007), their progress is the slowest of all second language learners. Their slow learning is connected to a quadruple burden: (1) their second language oral proficiency is low, sometimes comparable to that of a 1 ½ year-old child); (2) they are learning to read for the first time in their lives, but in a language they barely know; (3) their lack of literacy socially excludes them, and outside the classroom, they often have few chances to interact with native speakers of their second language; (4) their lack of literacy also means they have no access to additional second language input via the medium of written text. (Tarone et al. 2013; Young-Scholten & Strom 2006.)

Research indicates that low-educated adult immigrants acquire linguistic competence and learn to read in a second language in ways similar to young children and to educated second language learners. (Hawkins 2001; Kurvers 2002; Vainikka & Young-Scholten 1994; Young-Scholten & Strom 2006). Findings from these studies have implications for low-educated immigrant adults: they have the potential to reach higher levels of attainment than most of them currently do. To assist these low-educated second language learners, governments in post-industrialised countries fund basic skills instruction (Sticht 2009). The amount of instructional hours provided in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes is inadequate for these low-educated adult beginners, who may need up to eight times longer than educated learners to reach a low-intermediate level, i.e. B1 of the six-level Common European Framework of Reference for Languages/CEFR (Council of Europe 2001; Kurvers et al. 2010; Schellekens 2011; West & Reeves 2002). In some countries, entry and/or permanent residence requires language and literacy proficiency at levels which may never be reached by these adults. Access to appropriate instruction is persistent and growing problem, with teaching increasingly carried out by volunteers who at best may only be trained and experienced in teaching children or educated adults (Paget & Stevenson 2014).

Social exclusion, limited access to ESOL classes and poor-quality provision reduce these adults' amount of exposure to and interaction in English, and unsurprisingly, studies of this population reveal that extracurricular contact with or use of the second language and high-quality instructional provision are two key factors associated with accelerated rates of progress (e.g. Condelli et al. 2003; 2010; Kurvers et al. 2010).

Research on instructional practices with children and with younger and older educated second language learners shows that extra-curricular pleasure or extensive reading produces considerable benefits for child and adolescent native language readers. For example, such reading better predicts reading achievement, particularly with respect to comprehension, than does socio-economic status (European Commission 2011; PISA 2002; Sonnenschein et al. 2000). Reading fiction in particular improves children's social, cognitive and motivational development (Cass 1967) and it correlates with increased wellbeing for younger and older readers (Dijkic et al. 2009; Mar & Oatley 2008). In second language acquisition at all levels, pleasure reading produces similar literacy benefits and it also helps support the acquisition of second language linguistic competence (Bamford & Day 2004; Coady 1997; Horst 2005; Krashen 1988; 1989; 2003; 2004; Pigada & Schmitt 2006). The core features of pleasure reading are quantity, reading for gist and fluency and as Hill argues,

only books provide the quantity of text in a form that can be read comfortably, and only fiction provides the type of text that can develop a learner's fluency. This mirrors the experience of the native speaker, who progresses from fiction to non-fiction. The advantages of fiction are that the context is universal, and a combination of narrative and dialog much earlier to read than expository prose. (Hill 2008:186-187.)

The reading of fiction for pleasure thus has considerable potential to increase the rate at which low-educated adult beginners move from word recognition to text comprehension. However, the practice of individuals reading what, where, when and how they want is very rare in low-level ESOL classrooms. Accordingly, there is only a handful of small-scale studies on pleasure reading by adults at the lowest CEFR levels (Constantino 1995; Laymon 2012; 2013; Rodrigo et al. 2007; Williamson 2013; Yaden et al. 2003). Results from these studies are promising and show benefits are similar to those found for children and educated second language learners.

The number of very low level books available is one of several barriers that prevent ESOL programmes from encouraging this practice. Instructional resources rarely include adult fiction books which are linguistically accessible and narratively engaging and functional literacy curricula may not allow any time for reading activities beyond those relating to daily life and work. Low-educated immigrant adults therefore rarely read for pleasure as part of their basic skills language and literacy instruction (Young-Scholten & Maguire 2009). If the right resources exist in sufficient quantities, this can enable adults struggling to move beyond word-by-word reading to start comprehending discourse.

Successful pleasure reading heavily depends on interesting books at the right linguistic and reading level (Anderson et al. 1987; Crossley et al. 2012; Jose & Brewer 1984; Moses 2000; Ryan & Deci 2000; White 2007; Williams 1986). To accommodate a group of readers, there must be a selection of

accessible books at varying levels which cater to readers' different interests, for example, in a ratio of six books per reader Rodrigo et al. (2007). Since 2010, the Simply Cracking Good Stories project has been addressing the need for accessible and engaging books at and below the lowest CEFR level (A1). The project works with creative writers, linguists and artists on creating and field testing its imprint, Simply Stories books. At these low levels, books for these second language learners follow the tradition of so-called graded readers in their use of limited lexis, single-syllable words and short sentences to enable extensive pleasure reading (Hill 2008). Graded readers fall into two categories: the rewrite (e.g. of classical and fairy tales) and the simple original.¹ Simply Stories fall under the latter category. Similar to the lowest level graded readers, they use dialog. This enables grammatical use of the ellipsis common in spoken language and functions to reduce sentence length.

Simply Stories are written to enable emergent readers to process text for comprehension. Sentences are short, their syntax is canonical (subject-verb-object) and every word chosen has high semantic content. Pronouns and function words such as auxiliary verbs are limited or avoided altogether. While adjectives, adverbs and some prepositions have high semantic content, because each word added to a sentence slows down the reader's processing for meaning, such words are included only if they are truly necessary to the narrative. Because these are emergent readers who may still be struggling with aspects of the phonology of the second language (e.g. consonant clusters) and who are still laboriously sounding out words, the words in sentences are usually short (mono- or bisyllabic), do not contain clusters and are regularly spelled. The nouns and verbs used represent concrete rather than abstract concepts, and 98% of these are known by the reader (Hseuh-Chau & Nation 2000). As with children's early reading books, Simply Stories contain from one to four sentences per page and each set of sentences is accompanied by an image: an illustration or a photograph or a combination of both.

While the texts of Simply Stories are linguistically simple, the theme, content and narrative are sophisticated to engage adult readers with considerable life experience. Sophistication also relates to requiring the reader to interpret a text. That is, the writer does not provide complete information to the reader or may delay the release of information. This requires the reader to make inferences based on their wealth of experience as adult. In turn, this promotes reading at a deeper, often critical, level and enhances the reader's engagement with the text. While the case could be made that low-educated adult beginners find this too cognitively challenging, emergent readers simply need to be supported in transferring to reading the pragmatics skills of inferencing they automatically use in their oral interactions with others.

Traditional vs. digital

Traditional?

The project has thus far only made books available in hard copy form. This sort of distribution has several disadvantages both of which have resulted in a disappointingly low uptake of Simply Stories thus far. First and foremost, hard copy books, even those with only 30 or 40 pages and fewer than 200 words, are expensive for distribution to a non-local readership. The project has thus far used a print-on-demand service which, although it quickly produces and ships very high-quality books, its shipping costs treble the final cost of books. The second disadvantage is that distribution relies on teachers and program directors to order and distribute the books to the readers. Educators' choice of books may not be the readers' choice of books.

The project team has perhaps been complacent sticking to tradition. A traditional book is an object with physical existence in a three-dimensional world. This definition excludes forms of books that lack the materiality connected to a book as a permanent, non-alterable object. This object includes a spine, a front and back cover of a certain thickness with information and images, paper of a certain thickness and quality, pages organised in a sequence. These material features symbolize certain aspects of the culture in which books are produced and read (see e.g. Allen et al. 2011.) The project's

¹The vast majority of graded readers are written for the sizeable population of English-as-a-foreign language of primary and secondary school students worldwide; see e.g. <http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/>. Because English instruction increasingly begins in primary school, the majority of beginning-level graded readers is aimed at children. There are far fewer beginning-level books for adolescent and older readers.

target readership experiences the reading of hard copy print in the classroom in the form of reading and writing in service of the functions of daily life from reading bus schedules and medicine labels to writing notes to children's teachers.

Inside the classroom, there may be a shelf or two of hard copy beginners' paperback fiction books and black-and-white photocopies of books. There are only scores rather than hundreds or thousands of fiction books whose themes, content, narratives and simple text are appropriate for low-educated adult immigrants. Reader choice is severely limited. Teachers or their programs purchase books based on what they decide students will enjoy and/or benefit from reading. Program budgets for hard copy books and pre-selection of these by teachers/program directors reduce reader choice from among scores of books to a handful of books.

Digital narratives?

Digital resources are increasingly used effectively for ESOL classes at beginning and higher levels.

<http://www.mcedservices.com/phonics/phonics.html> and

http://esl.bowvalleycollege.ca/student_readers/index.html are digital non-fiction narratives

accompanied by audio. Learners also write their life stories in the classrooms and may then share these with outsiders (see e.g. <http://www.astorywithmeinit.ie/>).

Digital resources are often available for free, and this has greatly increased teachers' and learners' access to high-quality instructional resources. However, while these readers may develop some digital skills as a by-product of their use of such resources, this is not invariably the case and this is another barrier to going digital.

In middle class households in industrialised societies, there is an abundance of digital devices, from Kindles, X-boxes to Netflix, iPads, iPods to the almost antiquated laptops and desktops. The digital divide which applies at country level (Castells 1996) also applies to individuals in post-industrialised societies where children and adults at the lowest socio-economic stratum are often on the wrong side of the digital divide. The origins of low-educated immigrant adults in the poorest regions of the world mean that they, too, arrive in their new countries on the wrong side of the divide. Their lack of basic language and literacy skills keeps them on this side of the divide once they have resettled. Low-educated immigrant adults may completely lack digit skills and need targeted support (Reder et al. 2012). This situation is reinforced not only by learners' non-use of libraries, where they would be able to find the necessary support, but also by in ESOL classrooms lack of digital devices for learners (e.g. when instruction is provided in church meeting rooms or in spaces made available by community organizations without computer resource centers or labs).

Readers who lack digital skills cannot access digital books provided to them outside the classroom. Nonetheless, it makes sense to consider the benefits of supporting these emergent readers in their development of digital skills, and one source of motivation for doing so would be their ability to access a digital library dedicated to books for them. Here Simply Cracking Good Stories can tap into the growing well of experience with child emergent readers who are, as noted above, similar in some important ways to low-educated immigrant adult emergent readers. A first step could be to create a digital library along the lines of the large-scale International Children's Digital Library archive (Hourcade et al. 2003). This project has addressed lack of diverse collections of books in community libraries with limited resources and a decade since the publication cited the ICDL website suggests that the goal of fostering in children a love of reading is being met (see <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>). One focus of the project is design of these books, and given the use of images and importance of materiality in Simply Stories, the Simply Cracking Good Stories project stands to learn much from this other children's project. The availability of such an archive means that readers can, in the spirit of pleasure reading, access the books they want and read them when, where and how they want. If classrooms lack the right digital devices (e.g. appropriate computer screens to show two pages side-by-side in good resolution), access can occur at community centers and local libraries.

Pleasure reading books for low-educated adult immigrants are only very slowly appearing in digital form (e.g. Gatehouse Books <http://www.gatehousebooks.co.uk/> Whether digital books can

substitute or equal human-human interaction during reading is an issue for emergent child and adult readers. In their study of children, Korat and Shamir (2007) compared reading and language gains resulting from caregivers reading to children vs. children reading digital books and found that the latter showed comparable gains only when the digital books were appropriately designed. It is the multi-media features of digital books which make them attractive, yet these features can confuse and distract readers from making sense of the text and prevent comprehension. Such extensive consideration of digital materials is also imperative for low-educated readers.

Given the increasingly heavy use of digital materials for instruction, the temptation exists that providing books such as Simply Stories in digital form will become classroom teaching materials. Here it is important to consider the unrealized potential of digital learning for low-educated adults. Iqbal et al. (2010), for example, discuss the potential for enriching learning through use of three-dimensional technologies and argue that such technology can address low-educated adults' low motivation to devote the considerable effort it takes to become literate. They note that 3D platforms can serve low-educated adults with features such as self- and social presence, one-to-one and one-to-many interaction, learning control, embodied environment and learning by doing (Iqbal et al. 2010:373). They relate these features to assumptions by Knowles (e.g. 1980) about adult learning including the adult learners' need to know the reason for learning something and to be involved in learning as an independent problem solving process.

There are a number of issues relating to the above and to features of Simply Stories that digital provision would resolve. First, teachers and writers have strong and divergent views on font and images. Digital options could include choice of font and ability to manipulate images or look beneath those abstract images which are challenging. Half a decade ago Hill (2008) in his exhaustive survey of graded readers, took book editors to task for doing very little to help beginning readers understand text. They might provide a range reading aids but according to Hill, the majority were unhelpful and inadequate. Hill also suggests that editors' aids might draw on the insights of creative writing courses to show how authors develop the various aspects of a fiction book (Hill 2008:193). We have now moved on. The dynamic nature of digital provision means that the creators of books can respond to reader feedback.

Conclusion

The goal of the Simply Cracking Good Stories project is to foster the habit pleasure reading for adults who have never held a book in their hands. Low-educated immigrant adults should reap the same benefits from this practice as others long have. Digital books are increasingly being made available for children as a means to expand access to pleasure reading. This represents a considerable opportunity for publishers. The Simply Cracking Good Stories project, as publishers of the Simply Stories imprint, is ideally positioned to go digital. Through digital provision, the project can refine its goal: every adult immigrant who is an emergent should have the chance to start reading for pleasure. As publishers of Simply Stories, the project can distribute digital books far more easily, reaching thousands of teachers and new readers who can leapfrog into taking control of their own, digitally-based pleasure reading. This is our hypothesis, and we look forward to testing it.

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